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# How to Pick a Fight

## Visualisation and Sharing in Catastrophic Times

- [Jean Burgess](#), [Joy McEntee](#) and [Emma Nelms](#)

1 In a post September 11 era “the fight”, as a cultural construct, could hardly be more pertinent. We are seemingly forever poised on the edge of controversial U.S. led attacks on wayward Middle Eastern states and unexamined oppositions between the concepts of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ are evoked as valid justifications for battle. Our leaders muster us into wars of vigilance and national cohesion against unseen, unknown and uncomprehended terrorists hiding where communists once lurked under our beds.

2 The articles in this issue examine fights in terms of media strategies and cultural divides in a range of contexts. Our feature article is a work of a fiction, an extract from the sharply beautiful novella *Moving* by Julianne van Loon, describing a fight between friends, maybe lovers. Set against the harsh backdrop of urban working-class Sydney, the fight here is personal, a spontaneous response to a hurt done, an expression of anger and frustration. Loon’s work explores the nature of physical struggle, the bond of shared physicality between opponents and the potential for frustration and resolution. Perhaps a little akin to *Fight Club* in its affirmation of the distinctive intensity of violent contact Loon shifts the nuances to a female character living in a male dominated environment.

3 Mark Mullen’s detailed analysis of the politics of death in computer games is a timely intervention into the debates over the relationship between ‘virtual’ and ‘real world’ violence. Contrary to the conservative and neo-Marxist theses that games routinise killing and desensitise us to violence, his work suggests that gamers regularly make conscious choices that are unavailable to people in “real life:” most importantly, gamers can sometimes choose to put death or killing on hold in order to find alternatives. Mullen goes so far as to propose that gaming literacy may even provide a set of ethical tools for avoiding the acute situations that, it seems, “inevitably” result in violence or war.

4 Meanwhile, back in the “real” world, ex- war correspondent Chris Vaughan quotes the news maxim “If it bleeds, it leads” to open his often personal account of the journalistic imperative to get up close to violence. Vaughan’s essay reminds us that the news media’s focus on the acutely violent, explosive events that signify “war” does not proceed directly from an amorphous “ideology” that simply expresses and safeguards the material interests of dominant groups. Rather, such representations are at the same time selected and shaped according to the conventions and constraints (whether economic or political) of the professions that produce them.

“To be nobody-but-yourself—in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else—means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting.” (e. e. cummings)

5It is of course important to remember (as our feature story demonstrates) that fights can also be personal, local, part of everyday life—and these ordinary fights require as much rhetorical justification as any war. Paul Scott's analysis of the fights between surfers at Australian surf breaks—superficially enacted as struggles for territory, but also functioning to police the boundaries of what may seem to participants of surf cultures to be the last vestige of subcultural authenticity—refracts two key problems of postmodern Western culture through the lens of surfing: firstly, he offers insight into how citizens and consumers manage the tensions between localism and (corporate) globalism and, secondly, his discussion of surf rage throws the articulation between normative masculinity and physical aggression into stark relief.

“In accordance with our principles of free enterprise and healthy competition, I'm going to ask you two to fight to the death for it.” (Monty Python)

6Moving from the personal to the political, Louis Kaplan examines John Lennon and Yoko Ono's astute blend of radicalism, humour, stylistic flair and media negotiation in their battle for peace during the Vietnam War. The fight is depicted as a marketing campaign by the celebrity couple aimed at promoting peace as a desirable 'product' to the public and politicians whilst weathering criticism that it was mere self-promotion. Kaplan reveals their fight to be composed of both struggle and promotion of self and stance, hence making the personal political.

7Looking to a more recent campaign in the music world Axel Bruns scrutinizes the 2002 legal battles over royalty rates between America's powerful recording industry (RIAA) and the emerging Webcasters of online radio, battling to survive and serve their audiences with alternative music fare. Bruns traces the stages in the campaign and studies the rival hostilities and motivations.

8This issue has a substantial concentration of articles devoted to the film *Fight Club*. Our authors have found it instructive to return to that nasty little fable about characters that turn to the fight as a way of assuaging an obscure sense of alienation from contemporary, capitalist society. They were all interested in how the particularly blokey sense of anomie depicted in *Fight Club* continues the tradition of *Falling Down* (Dir. Joel Schumacher, 1993) in creating a permanent sense of crisis about a perceived “masculine impotence in the face of a loss suffered but not remembered.” (Gatens 86)

9Melissa Iocco examines how this sense of crisis, this sense of men being divided from themselves, is somatically represented in spectacular screen displays of suffering, of damage. She looks at how fighting writes protest and resistance on the male—through the scars, the bleeding, and the destruction inflicted by fighting. She also reflects on how analogous crises may be displaying themselves culturally off-screen, as the kind of talented, disaffected young men responsible for flying planes into the Twin Towers seem to be helping remake the world we inhabit in the image of project mayhem.

10Kate Greenwood pursues the question of how doing things to the male body inflects the construction of masculine identity construction. She discusses Tyler's assertion that the “real pain,” the total temporary immanence experienced by the men engaged in fighting, is a path back to an “authentic” experience of masculinity.

11 Tracy Caldwell turns from exteriorities to interiorities, to conduct a psychoanalytic reading of how the film exploits grotesque confusion of boundaries and of gender identities to dramatise a contemporary struggle surrounding the construction of masculine subjectivity. She uses Creed's readings of Kristeva to analyse how the 'abject' is used in *Fight Club* as an urgent warning about the danger of not finding a way to repair masculine identity.

12 Taken together, these three articles illustrate how *Fight Club* extends a grand old American tradition of using the fight, the exchange of blows, as a way of constructing identity. Faulkner's Addie lays out its virtues in *As I Lay Dying*:

I would look forward to the times when they faulted, so I could whip them. When the switch fell I could feel it upon my flesh; when it welted and ridged it was my blood that ran, and I would think with each blow of the switch: Now you are aware of me! Now I am something in your secret and selfish life, who have marked your blood with my own for ever and ever.

13 That the 'fight' described here is hugely asymmetrical—one party whips and the other is whipped—does not diminish the effectiveness of the assault for the one using it as a device for constructing identity, and asserting a particular relationship between the parties to the 'fight.' Perhaps this is why George W. Bush appears to be so eager, at the moment, to find that Iraq may have "faulted"...

14 There is, in this issue, a thunderous silence about this most pressing and obvious fight. We were somewhat surprised, given the number and diversity of submissions to this issue, that none chose to directly discuss the politics of the U.S. led war on terrorism and campaign to attack Iraq. It seems a ready example of the construct of a 'fight' involving the framing of an opposition, the build up and exchange of hostilities and the development of a cultural discourse of security, national cohesion and identity. Yet perhaps this fight's proximity renders it too immediate and disturbing for comfort, accentuating the closeness, the almost inevitable physical and deep emotional resonance of fights themselves. Which is why Julianne van Loon's direct, credible and evocative prose seems such a good place to begin. Let's rumble.

## Works Cited

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